Kent Athletic Club - a short history in places

Neil Gordon-Orr

It's December 2022 and in a room above a pub in Catford, people are eating, drinking and now dancing at the Kent Athletic Club Christmas party. It crosses my mind that it was in this same pub – possibly this very room – that the club itself was established a century and a quarter ago. What would the founders make of it all if they were to walk into the room now? The electronic beats would no doubt seem strange, though perhaps not as strange as the large screen on the wall on which people have been watching England lose to France in the World Cup (yes my Victorian forebears, the round ball game really did take off!). But all the talk of races, training and injuries would be very familiar to them, and they were also no strangers to letting off steam after a hard work out. Their's was a time when sports clubs would often hold very healthy sounding 'smoking concerts' with music, beer and tobacco. Most of all they would I hope be proud that their early efforts had been carried forward over the generations and that Kent AC is as vibrant and successful as it has ever been.

Any club is an association of people coming together for a common purpose, in the case of an athletic club that purpose is to develop and compete as a team and as individuals in our chosen sport. For 125 years Kent AC has been the main athletics club for the Lewisham area of South East London and our members have got to know its parks and streets better than most in endless miles of running. But a club is also a social group and there have been 125 years of gatherings in pubs, clubs and other social spaces to celebrate and sometimes commiserate. Yes there have been romances and Kent AC babies but also lots of friendship, support and the occasional argument! This is a short account of the history of the club told not in results, records or even people, but through some of the places we have made our own. Many of these places still exist in one form or other so you can plan your own Kent AC themed run, walk or crawl…

Published September 2023 on the occasion of Kent AC's 125th anniversary dinner at the Old Joinery in Greenwich. Thanks to Len Reilly, who is organising a run between some of these places, and to Larry Garnham, whose epic club history can be found on the club's website. Dedicated to Ron Hale (1925-2023), a member of the club for 78 years and to Dame Dibaba, who as a refugee has travelled further than most to join our club and must surely be allowed to remain here.

On 18th June 1898, ‘A meeting of the Lewisham Hare and Hounds and West Kent Harriers was held at Lewisham when it was unanimously decided to amalgamate and become one club, under the name of the Kent Athletic Club… The colours will be navy blue and white with the White Horse of Kent on the back’ (Brockley News, 1/7/1898). The name was contentious from day one as it appeared to lay claim to the whole of Kent rather than its actual base in the north western tip of the old county, an area in the process of being swallowed up by South East London. But it stuck…

The venue for this first meeting is believed to have been the **Black Horse and Harrow** pub in Catford (167 Rushey Green, pictured below) where Lewisham Hare and Hounds had earlier had its HQ. The pub has had a periodic association with Kent AC ever since – the club held its annual general meetings there c.2004 to 2013 when it was known as **The Goose on the Green**, and in 2022 held its Christmas party upstairs in what was then called **Ninth Life**.

The club's badge today includes the earlier presumed foundation dates of its predecessor clubs as well as its own 1898 starting point. Lewisham Hare and Hounds had been formed at a meeting at **Courthill Hall**, Lewisham in 1884 and its first headquarters was at **Hither Green Hall**. From here it ran cross country paper chase races across what at that time was still largely open fields. For instance its first run, on Saturday 25th October 1884, was on a five mile route from Hither Green Hall 'over the Manor Fields to Burnt Ash, and thence across some ploughed land to Grove Park, returning home along Hither Green Lane'. Later HQs included **Brookdale Hall** (Brookdale Road, from 1887), Ladywell Baths, and the Black Horse where new 'dressing and bath accommodation' was said to be under construction in 1889. Post-race tea was sometimes followed by a smoking concert in local pubs including the **Rose of Lee** (162 Lee High Road, now closed), The **Plough** (324 Lewisham Road, now closed) and the **White Horse** (1 Lee High Road, now the **Lewisham Tavern**).

West Kent Harriers had been founded in 1889. Its club headquarters switched between a number of pubs locally including initially the **Wickham Arms** (Upper Brockley Road SE4) and then the **Talbot Hotel** (Tyrwhitt Road SE4) followed by the **Crown and Anchor** in Algernon Road (now demolished) from 1892. Races were sometimes run from other pubs, including **The Grove Hotel** in Dulwich in 1898 (520 Lordship Lane SE22, now closed). As more and more of the area was built upon the club moved its HQ further out to the **George Inn** in Beckenham (111 High St BR3) holding races from there including the club's Ten Mile Champs. The club's social life included an annual Cinderella Dance – that is one finishing at midnight - at the **Amersham Hall,** 411 New Cross Road (now demolished).

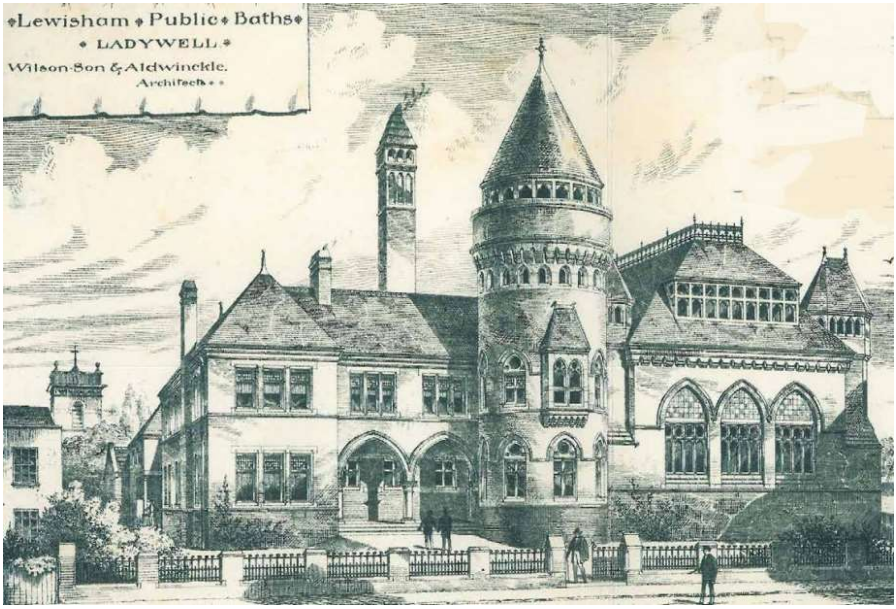
Unlike some other clubs Kent AC has never owned its club house, so its club headquarters wandered over the years around pubs and other facilities. Club HQs were not just places to socialise after races, or to hold committee meetings. They sometimes also served as changing rooms and places at which to start and finish races. Kent AC's first headquarters was at **Ladywell Baths** which had been built in 1884. Its first club champs were held in 1898 in **Lewisham Park** and there were also early local cross country races, often followed by a social event. After an 1898 race with Herne Hill Harriers 'both clubs adjourned to the **Black Bull** where tea was served. Afterwards some 60 members and

friends spent an enjoyable musical evening'. The Black Bull is now known as the **Fox and Firkin** (316 Lewisham High Street).

KENT ATHLETIC CLUB.

The Committee of the above club have arranged the following fixtures for remainder of season.—July 19th, 880 yards handicap, July 26th, 440 yards club championship, August 9th, 1,000 yards handicap, August 16th, 1 mile club championship, August 30th, 1 mile handicap. The handicaps will be run at Lewisham Park, members dressing at headquarters, Ladywell Baths, Lewisham, all competitors to be on their marks at 7.45 p.m. In the club championships a gold medal will be given to winner, silver to runner up, and standard medals to those doing 56 secs. for 440 yards and 4 min. 30 sec. for mile. No member to take two medals.

Kent AC's first races (Greenwich Observer, 15 July 1898)



After a four mile Kent AC road race from Ladywell Baths in 1900, runners were invited to 'a smoking concert' at the **Freemason's Railway Hotel**: 'members and friends are asked to turn up in full force

and bring their music' (this Ladywell pub, latterly the Masons, closed in 2011 and is currently **Le Delice** café at 38 Ladywell Road).

In the 1900s, the club's HQ moved to the **Brockley Jack** pub (408 Brockley Road) where it remained until the 1920s. As well as a venue for annual general meetings and other events, races took place from the pub. For instance the route of the Three Mile Road Handicap in 1911 went from the pub 'along Brockley Grove, twice around the cemetery, then along Marnock road' and back to the finish at the Jack.

Regular runs also took place from the **Anchor** (165 Lewisham Rd) and the **Railway Tavern** in Lower Sydenham (401 Southend Lane). The club did not have regular access to a track, though it sometimes used the one at **Goldsmiths Institute** in New Cross in what is now the College backfield as well as holding events in parks such as **Ladywell Recreation Ground**. Urbanisation meant that the club had to go further afield for cross country and the practice of having a separate winter 'country quarters' seems to have started out at the **Tigers Head** in Bromley (14 Mason's Hill). This road was to have a long association with the club - in 1920s the **Two Brewers** (now closed) in the same road was the winter HQ as was **Mason's Hill School** by 1930, from where an annual point to point cross country race to the **Bull's Head**, Pratt's Bottom via Keston Common took place.

"Brockley Jack"

KENT ATHLETIC CLUB.

AFFILIATED TO
A.A.A.; S.C.C.C.A., AND S.T.C.C.A.

Headquarters:
THE BROCKLEY JACK HOTEL,
CROFTON PARK, S.E.

Country Quarters:
TIGER'S HEAD, BROMLEY, KENT.

Hon. Sec.:
CARL WALLACE, 94, Lewisham Road, S.E.
Assist. Hon. Sec. & Hon. Treas.:
F. TILL, 10, Chesterfield Grove, East Dulwich.

190

Kent AC headed paper from 1900s – with founding secretary Carl Wallace living at 94 Lewisham Road

Later cross country HQs included the **London Transport sports ground** in Langley Park (South Eden Park Road) in 1946, the **Old Bromleans Tennis Club** in Hayes Lane (1948), **Hayes Scout Hall** (1954) and **Prince's Plain School**, Bromley (now Trinity Primary School) in 1956. Even further afield, the **Darrick Wood Swimming Poo**l in Farnborough was used in 1949.

In 1930 a new cinder running track was laid out in **Deptford Park**, and Kent AC was the first club to hold a meeting there. Until the middle of the decade this became the main focus of club activities, with races and training taking place there. Mid-week training also took place in this period from the **Studio Club** (corner of Bromley Road and Whitefoot Lane, now demolished), where the club held its Annual Dinner and Presentation in 1931. Regular Kent AC dances took place at the **Co-operative Hall** in East Street, Bromley in the late 1920s and at the **Eden Park Hotel** (now **Toby Carvery**, 422 Upper Elmers End Road) in the early 1930s.

Up until this time the club, and indeed the sport, had been a predominantly male affair. By 1928 though there was a Kent Ladies AC training in **Charlton Park** and at the **Kidbrooke R.A.F. ground**, Lee Road, Eltham. The club was formally separate to Kent AC but closely linked - for instance the two clubs held joint meetings in

Deptford Park (and later at Ladywell) and joint social events including a dance at the **Downham Tavern** (435 Downham Way) in 1934.

Deptford Park today – the outline of old track still visible

In 1936 the London County Council built a new cinder running track at what was then known as **Ladywell Recreation Ground** and this soon became the main base for Kent AC as it has continued to be ever since. By 1937 the club was training there three days a week and Kent Ladies AC had also shifted its track activities there. The Ladies club held dances and presentations in this period at **St Barnabas Hall** (Churchdown Road, Downham) and at the **Chiltonian Works** biscuit factory in Manor Lane, SE12 (now demolished).

Kent AC's calendar for much of its 125 year history has consisted of a weekly routine of Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday training and Saturday competition, within a yearly cycle including an annual general meeting, a presentation night with a dinner and/or dancing, and summer club championships, held at Ladywell for most of the last 80 years. This has of course meshed with the seasonal cycle of the sport, with an autumn/winter cross country and road racing season and summer athletics on the track and field.

A race at Ladywell in 1950 – starter is Kent AC president Fred Lane

After an interregnum during the Second World War, Kent AC resumed its activities at Ladywell track, though in the later 1940s there were also mid-week training runs from **St John's Mission Hall** (Campshill Road SE13) and at **Catford Youth Club** (Ravensbourne Park Crescent SE6) – both long gone. A Ladies section was relaunched in 1949, though it faced competition for a while from Phoenix AC set up as a women only club by ex-Kent AC members. The opening of the **Crystal Palace National Sports Centre** in 1964 provided an additional training facility that was soon being used by Kent AC to supplement its Ladywell activities.

Kent AC has sometimes organised races and athletics events in other locations including at **Sparrows Den**, West Wickham (where for instance the club staged Young Athletes Cross Country Races in 1975) and at **Beckenham Place Park** where the club first held a cross country race in 1983. Probably its longest lasting event was the Sidcup Ten Mile road race, held annually from the 1980s until 2015 with its starting point, at least in later years, at **Sidcup Leisure Centre.**

The **Railway Tavern** on Catford Bridge (now **Catford Bridge Tavern**) was a regular venue for AGMs and sometimes other social events in the 1960s and again through the 1990s when it was known as the Copperfield. A new **Ladywell swimming pool** opened in 1965 (now demolished), with club committee meetings and AGMs being held there in late 1960s/early 1970s. AGMs were also held at **Lewisham Town Hall** committee rooms (including 1974 and 1977), at the **Pie and Kilderkin** pub in Forest Hill in the late 80s (now **The Signal**, 7 Devonshire Rd SE23) and since 2015 at the **Blythe Hill Tavern** (319 Stanstead Rd, SE6). An extraordinary meeting at **Crofton Leisure Centre** in 1979 seriously considered winding up the club at a time when it was in the doldrums but it soon revived (the Centre was on site of what is now Prendergast Ladywell Fields School in Manwood Road).

The Catford Bridge Tavern

Dinners, dances and presentations have been held at various venues over the years including in the 1960s and 70s at the **Bromley Court Hotel**, the **New Hackwood Hotel** (Widmore Road, Bromley), the **Black Prince,** Bexley, the **New Inn** in Hayes and **Cobbs restaurant**, Sydenham. Other venues have included **Catford Cricket Club** in Penerley Road (1992), **Private Banks Sports Ground** in Canadian Avenue (2002), the **Station Hotel** in Hither Green (2016) and **Blackheath Wanderers** club house in Eltham Road (2019). For more

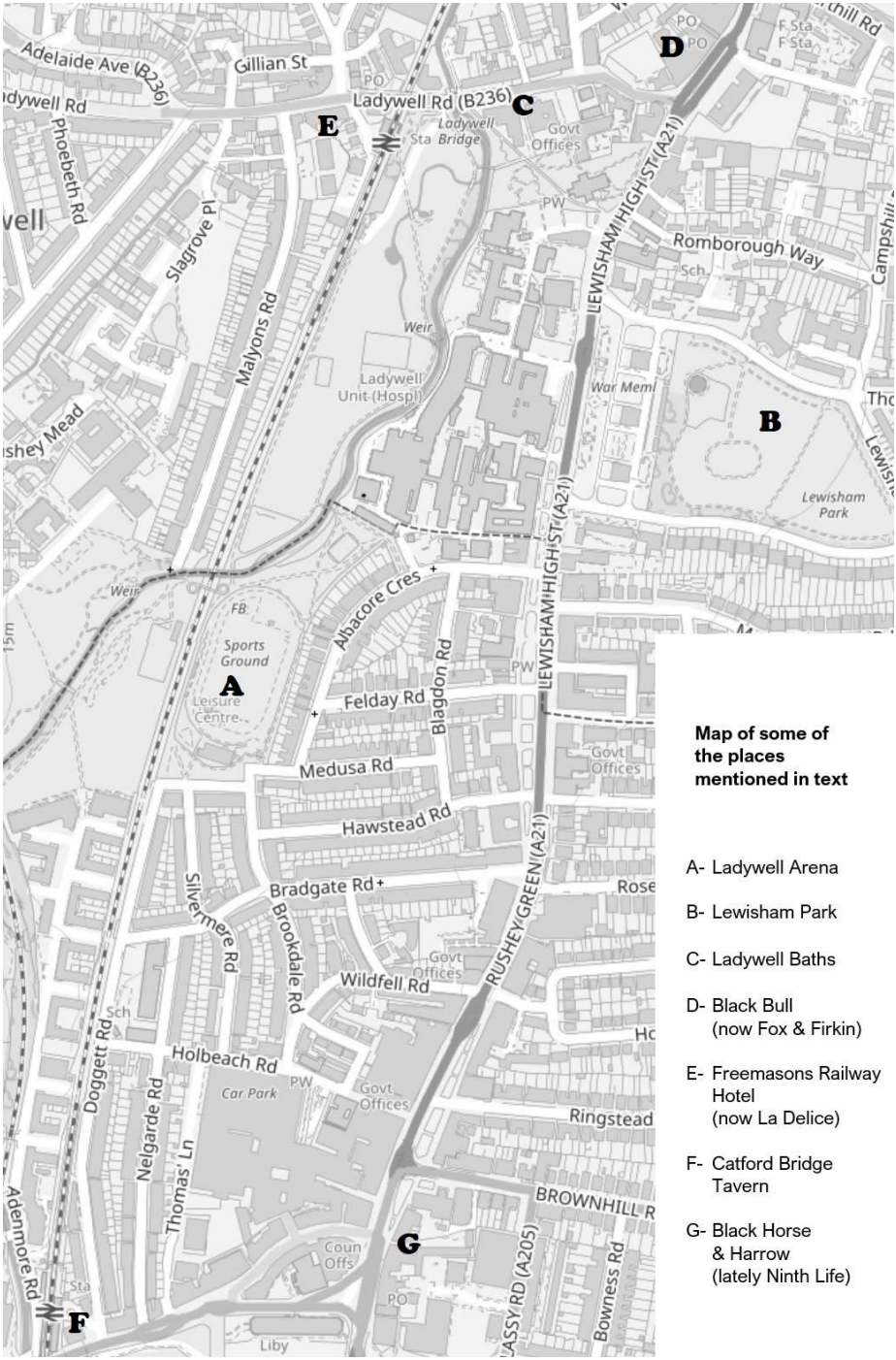
than ten years up to 2016, presentations were held at **Beckenham Cricket Club** (Foxgrove Road BR3). The club celebrated its Golden Jubilee (50 years) at the **Bridge House Hotel**, London Bridge in 1948 and its centenary in 1998 at **Chapter One** restaurant in Farnborough.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Ladywell Arena was temporarily closed and the club held some of its 2020 club champs races at **Sutcliffe Park** track (Eltham Road SE9). It also held a series of 'virtual' races, where members ran their legs on their own in many different places and then compared times.

Kent AC has competed in athletics events all over the country, and its members have competed all over the world, including at Olympic Games in Rio and Tokyo. To tell the tale of all these places and races would take a very long book, but we could perhaps just single out one location as it falls at least partly within our Lewisham patch. Since 1981 the London Marathon has started at **Blackheath/Greenwich Park**, a major fixture for the club with both men's and women's teams winning the English club championships within the race. We might also mention the **Chandos pub** off Trafalgar Square which has become the club's regular post-Marathon drinking point.

In 2023, the year of its 125th anniversary, Kent AC is flourishing with growing women's, men's and junior sections. Members have taken part in numerous events - Southern Athletics League fixtures in Stevenage, Mile End and Olympic Park, Road Relays in Birmingham's Sutton Park, National Cross Country Champs at Bolesworth Castle, Chester. There have been Assembly League races in Victoria Park Beckenham Place Park and Sutcliffe Park, and juniors have been to Kent Youth Athletes League fixtures in Medway Park and Norman Park, Bromley. A team of 20 won the Welsh Castles Relays and more than 50 ran in the London Marathon.

But the heart of the club remains in Lewisham at the Ladywell Arena where in May 2023 the club held a successful Coronation Games. As well as the track itself being busy, members can be seen heading off from here to run around Ladywell Fields or to hill training sessions at **Hilly Fields** - where since a parkrun started in 2013 nearly 300 Kent AC members have collectively run more than 10,000 5Ks. Here's to the next 125 years of running, jumping and throwing – not to mention eating, drinking and dancing.



Map of some of the places mentioned in text

A- Ladywell Arena

B- Lewisham Park

C- Ladywell Baths

D- Black Bull
(now Fox & Firkin)

E- Freemasons Railway Hotel
(now La Delice)

F- Catford Bridge Tavern

G- Black Horse & Harrow
(lately Ninth Life)